
Observations from Isaiah

LESSON XVI : THE DARK PROPHECIES OF BABYLON, EDM AND THE ARABIANS (21:1-17)

General outline (from Young's *Isaiah*):

- I. The Crisis and the Messiah (1:1-12:6)
 - A. Introduction to the Entire Prophecy (1:1-31)
 - B. Early Messages of Isaiah (2:1-5:30)
 - C. Judah's True Hope: The Messianic King (6:1-12:6)
- II. The Theocracy and the Nations (13:1-39:8)
 - A. Judah and the World Power (13:1-27:13)
 - 1. The Growth of the Mesopotamia Power (13:1-14:32)
 - 2. The Downfall of Moab, Syria, and Other Nations (15:1-18:7)
 - 3. Egypt in Confusion (19:1-25)
 - 4. Egypt and Ethiopia: A False Hope (20:1-6)
 - 5. Babylon (21:1-10)
 - 6. Edom (21:11,12)
 - 7. The Arabians (21:13-17)

5. *Babylon (21:1-10)*

“DOOM, DESPAIR, AND AGONY ON ME ...” — We are entering a different portion of Isaiah's writings as we begin this chapter. Chapters 13-20 gave prophecies that were “buoyant and optimistic” where “even the world's superpowers are subject to the word of the Lord and his word is full of glorious promises.” [Motyer, *Isaiah*] These next chapters however (21-23) give a series of prophecies that are somewhat gloomy and dark with each oracle containing an air of mystery about it. “The series begin with a vision of such horror that Isaiah recoils from it (21:1-10); this is followed by a voice calling out of the darkness and being promised more darkness (21:11,12); then come Arabian tribes in the desert without necessary supplies (21:13-17), followed by Jerusalem committing the unforgivable sin (22:14). The light at the end of the tunnel is the oracle on Tyre (23:18) where age-long materialism becomes sharing and out-right worldliness becomes holiness to the Lord.... *History is not a tale of everything getting better and better. Rather, divine judgments become starker, problems remain unsolved and the people of God live below their dignity. Yet even so, darkness is streaked by the light of dawn.*” [Motyer, *Isaiah*] But rather than being negative we have every reason to be quite optimistic about the future *with God in the picture. In the hands of man we don't have evolution but rather devolution (defined as “retrograde evolution”) where man began at his pinnacle (Adam) and will degrade spiritually and morally when left to himself. Entirely pessimistic. But the optimism is the Lord has intervened and will not leave us in this situation. The Word of God teaches man will bring himself to the brink of destruction when the Lord Jesus Christ Himself will return to set up His kingdom. Our hope is in Christ, not man!* Man left to himself is as expressed in the old “Hee-Haw” song: “Doom, despair and agony on me. Deep dark depression, excessive misery. If it weren't for bad luck I'd have no luck at all. Doom, despair and agony on me.”

DIFFICULT PASSAGE — *“This passage bristles with difficulties for the would-be interpreter; yet, as is so often the case in such circumstances, the main thrust of its message is clear: God would destroy pagan Babylon (v. 9). There have been two main schools of interpretation. Some take it that the occasion depicted in the prophet’s vision is the downfall of Babylon in 539, when Cyrus the Persian entered the city with his triumphant forces. Cyrus was originally king of Persian lands that were formerly part of Elam, and he had conquered Media a decade or so before his assault on Babylonia. So ‘Elam’ and ‘Media’ in v. 2 refer to the multinational army of Cyrus.... The main rival of this interpretation relates the passage to the time of Merodach-Baladan, king of Babylon. This king, who is mentioned in Isa 39 ... revolted against Assyria and had himself crowned king of Babylon in 722 BC, with the support of the Elamites. He reigned during several periods; and after his death, Babylon had further times of independence from Assyria before Sennacherib’s ferocious destruction of it in 689.... This puts not only the prophecy but also its fulfillment in Isaiah’s day.” [Grogan, *Isaiah*] Grogan remains neutral in his interpretation but some take a more definitive stand: Motyer places this at the time of the Assyrians in 689 BC while others (Delitzsch, Barnes) takes this as a reference to Babylon’s destruction by Cyrus in 536 BC. One interpretation I particularly like is Oswalt’s: **“One wonders if ... an eighth-century origin could not include both materials.** From the Judeans’ point of view, between 715 and 700 it was important to say that Babylon could offer no lasting help to them at that time. That Babylon would fall to Cyrus in 539 would be of little significance. At the same time any historically accurate picture of Babylon’s fate with regard to Judah and with regard to God’s sovereignty over the nations would have had to reckon with the truth that Babylon’s ultimate defeat was yet to come (39:5-7). **Thus the vision seems to combine the pictures of both the near and the far situations in order to give a complete statement.**” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] **What a marvel is the word of God! — never out of date and always relevant.***

EITHER A COMFORT OR A WARNING TO GOD’S PEOPLE — Dependent upon the time reference, the Lord was either giving consolation or a warning to His people. *If the destruction foretold was near at hand, the Lord was again telling the Jews not to trust in the might of man but rather to depend upon Him, illustrated by the fact that their potential ally of Babylon would not win the immediately upcoming rebellion. If the destruction was at the hands of Cyrus, the Jews would have been in captivity for 70 years and the Lord was giving encouragement that He had not forgotten His people but would bring them out of captivity. Either situation is possible and both shows the heart of the Lord for those who belong to Him.*

An oracle concerning the Desert by the Sea: Like whirlwinds sweeping through the southland, an invader comes from the desert, from a land of terror. A dire vision has been shown to me: The traitor betrays, the looter takes loot. Elam, attack! Media, lay siege! I will bring to an end all the groaning she caused. (NIV)

The burden of the desert of the sea. As whirlwinds in the south pass through; so it cometh from the desert, from a terrible land. A grievous vision is declared unto me; the treacherous dealer dealeth treacherously, and the spoiler spoileth. Go up, O Elam: besiege, O Media; all the sighing thereof have I made to cease. (KJV)

The burden of the wilderness of the sea. ‘Like hurricanes in the south for passing through, From the wilderness it hath come, From a fearful land. A hard vision hath been declared to me, The treacherous dealer is dealing treacherously, And the destroyer is destroying. Go up, O Elam, besiege, O Media, All its sighing I have caused to cease. (YLT)

“THE DESERT BY THE SEA” — There is no question this desert is Babylon as evidenced by v9 but why Isaiah spoke of it as such is not known. “The term ‘desert’ is usually applied to a wilderness, or to a comparatively barren and uncultivated country — a place for flocks and herds (Ps 65:13; Jer 9:9ff); to an actual waste, sandy desert (Isa 32:15; 35:1); and particularly to the deserts of Arabia (Gen 14:6; 16:7; Deut 11:24). It may here be applied to Babylon either historically, as having been once an unreclaimed desert: or by anticipation, as descriptive of what it would be after it should be destroyed by Cyrus, or possibly both these ideas may have been combined.... *Of the sea* — There has been also much difference of opinion in regard to this word. But there can be no doubt that it refers to the Euphrates, and to the extensive region of marsh that was covered by its waters.” [Barnes, *Notes on OT*]

THE COMING INVADERS — Whether the invaders are the Assyrians or the Medes / Persians, Isaiah speaks as if he is in Babylon and describes the invaders as rapidly approaching dreadful storms, whirlwinds threatening destruction to everything in its way. This is not a single storm but rather a storm upon storm, wave upon wave battering Babylon. To the south of Babylon would have been the desert of Arabia with winds so violent they’ve been known to tear away tents occupied by a caravan.

THE INVADERS’ VIOLENT NATURE — Isaiah describes the coming invaders as doing the work they are accustomed of doing. If a reference to Assyria, they are well-known throughout history to be an aggressive, violent people. The burden of this prophecy is grievous to Isaiah, a point which he elaborates on in the next few verses. *“The thing which grips the prophet is the perverseness of warfare. He is not seeing courage, self-sacrifice, and commitment but rather treachery and greed as the works of a lifetime, patiently built up and cared for, are destroyed in a violent moment by all that is ugly in humanity.”* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

THE COMMAND IS GIVEN! — Whether this command is given by the general leading the army or as seen as coming from the Lord, Isaiah “hears” the armies being given the signal to advance. Motyer points out here reference to Elam as a nation indicates this was written early since Elam was no longer a nation when Babylon was destroyed by Cyrus. Barnes however notes Elam was the country originally possessed by the Persians and therefore refers to the Persians in general.

THE END OF THE OPPRESSION — “The probable meaning is that suggested by Jerome, that God would bring to an end all the sighs and groans which Babylon had caused in a world suffering under her oppressions.” [Barnes, *Notes on OT*]

<i>At this my body is racked with pain, pangs seize me, like those of a woman in labor; I am staggered by what I hear, I am bewildered by what I see. My heart falters, fear makes me tremble; the twilight I longed for has become a horror to me. They set the tables, they spread the rugs, they eat, they drink! Get up, you officers, oil the shields!</i> (NIV)	<i>Therefore are my loins filled with pain: pangs have taken hold upon me, as the pangs of a woman that travaileth: I was bowed down at the hearing of it; I was dismayed at the seeing of it. My heart panted, fearfulness affrighted me: the night of my pleasure hath he turned into fear unto me. Prepare the table, watch in the watchtower, eat, drink: arise, ye princes, and anoint the shield.</i> (KJV)	<i>Therefore filled have been my loins [with] great pain, Pangs have seized me as pangs of a travailing woman, I have been bent down by hearing, I have been troubled by seeing. Wandered hath my heart, trembling hath terrified me, The twilight of my desire He hath made a fear to me, Arrange the table, watch in the watch-tower, Eat, drink, rise, ye heads, anoint the shield, (YLT)</i>
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THE COMPLEX NATURE OF OUR GOD REVEALED IN THE PROPHET — “Merely because he prophesies doom and bloodshed does not mean that he delights in these. The same sensitivity which made the prophets aware of what God was saying to them also made them empathize with the human tragedies which their messages portended.... The violence of the vision which has come to the prophet is almost more than he can bear. He expresses this dismay in physical terms: abdominal cramps wrack him like birth-pains; he is doubled up and disoriented; his heart palpitates; he is seized with uncontrollable shuddering. *One may ask why this should be. After all, Babylon was no true friend of Judah in 700, and she was an oppressor in 540.... No other prophet of the Exile manifests such a concern for Babylon. Most manifest positive satisfaction over Babylon’s downfall.... [The] prophet’s deep humanity is revealed in this kind of response. With terrific intensity the prophet is aware of individual persons bleeding and suffering, of families ripped apart and destroyed, of hope shattered. The prophet who does not feel some empathy for the personal horrors which destruction of his enemies will entail is not reflecting accurately the character of the God for whom he speaks.*” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] What is our attitude towards the lost? Perhaps we may claim to have compassion towards the lost in general but what of specific individuals who ridicule our faith? Does it hurt us to know their eternal future? Do we shed tears over the lost?

THE SUDDEN NATURE OF THE DESTRUCTION — Even the commentators which relegate these verses to Assyria in 689 BC state this description of destruction fits well what happened when Babylon fell to Cyrus as recorded in Daniel 5. “The table here refers to a feast — that impious feast mentioned in Dan 5 in the night in which Babylon was taken, and Belshazzar slain. [Historians] and Daniel all agree in the account that Babylon was taken in the night in which the king and his nobles were engaged in feasting and revelry. The words of Xenophon are, ‘But Cyrus, when he heard that there was to be such a feast in Babylon, in which all the Babylonians would drink and revel through the whole night, on that night, as soon as it began to grow dark, taking many people, opened the dams into the river;’ that is, he opened the dikes ... and suffered the waters of the Euphrates again to flow over the country so that he could enter Babylon beneath its wall in the channel of the river.... The army of Cyrus entered Babylon by two divisions — one on the north where the waters of the Euphrates entered the city, and the other by the channel of the Euphrates on the south. Knowing that the city was given up to revelry on that night, they had agreed to imitate the sound of the revelers until they should assemble around the royal palace in the center of the city. They did so. When the king heard the noise, supposing that it was the sound of a drunken mob, he ordered the gates of the palace to be opened to ascertain the cause of the disturbance. When they were thus opened, the army of Cyrus rushed in, and made an immediate attack on all who were within. It is to this moment that we may suppose the prophet here refers, when the king, aroused and alarmed, would call on his nobles to arm themselves for battle.” [Barnes, *Notes on OT*] “Herodotus tells us that the taking of Babylon by the Persians in 539 B.C. was so swift that many who were at their wine in the city center did not even know that the outlying parts of the city were in enemy hands.” [Grogan, *Isaiah*] ***“This is always the story of judgement. One of sin’s functions is to deaden moral sensitivities until the possibility of retribution becomes unthinkable.*** So it was at Sodom (Gen 19:14), and so it will be at the last day (Mk 13:35,36). While the prophet is convulsed with horror at what is about to take place, those on whom the horror will fall are destroying the very faculties which might have warned them.” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

“PREPARE FOR BATTLE!” — The command for the officers to “arise and oil the shields” is equivalent to sounding the call to battle. “Shields were instruments of defense prepared to ward off

the spears and arrows of an enemy in battle. They were usually made of a rim of brass or wood, and over this was drawn a covering of the skin of an ox or other animal in the manner of a drum-head with us. Occasionally the hide of a rhinoceros or an elephant was used.... But whatever skin might be used, it was necessary occasionally to rub it over with oil lest it should become hard, and crack, or lest it should become so rigid that an arrow or a sword would easily break through it.... The sense is, 'Prepare your arms! Make ready for battle!' ” [Barnes, *Notes on OT*]

This is what the Lord says to me: “Go, post a lookout and have him report what he sees. When he sees chariots with teams of horses, riders on donkeys or riders on camels, let him be alert, fully alert.” And the lookout shouted, “Day after day, my lord, I stand on the watchtower; every night I stay at my post. Look, here comes a man in a chariot with a team of horses. And he gives back the answer: ‘Babylon has fallen, has fallen! All the images of its gods lie shattered on the ground!’ ” (NIV)

For thus hath the LORD said unto me, Go, set a watchman, let him declare what he seeth. And he saw a chariot with a couple of horsemen, a chariot of asses, and a chariot of camels; and he hearkened diligently with much heed: And he cried, A lion: My Lord, I stand continually upon the watchtower in the daytime, and I am set in my ward whole nights: And, behold, here cometh a chariot of men, with a couple of horsemen. And he answered and said, Babylon is fallen, is fallen; and all the graven images of her gods he hath broken unto the ground. (KJV)

For thus said the Lord unto me: ‘Go, station the watchman, That which he seeth let him declare.’ And he hath seen a chariot — a couple of horsemen, The rider of an ass, the rider of a camel, And he hath given attention — He crieth — a lion, ‘On a watch-tower my lord, I am standing continually by day, And on my ward I am stationed whole nights. And lo, this, the chariot of a man is coming, A couple of horsemen.’ And he answereth and saith: ‘Fallen, fallen hath Babylon, And all the graven images of her gods He hath broken to the earth. (YLT)

ISAIAH THE WATCHMAN — Either still in Babylon or possibly the scene has changed to Judah, the watchman is posted to watch for signs of Babylon’s fall. Oswalt says nearly all commentators agree the watchman was Isaiah himself. *The watchman is told what to watch for (v7), was faithful in his duty, persevering at his watch for as long as it takes (v8), and saw the predicted event fulfilled (v9).* “In these verses (v8,9) the watchman speaks, first telling of his perseverance, with perhaps a trace of impatience (*all day long and all night*), and second, announcing the appearance of the sign and its meaning for Babylon and her gods. Kaiser suggests the plausibility that v8 functions to heighten the suspense between vs 7 and 9. *Certainly if the passage dates to 700 the wait was a very long one until the final signs of Babylon’s doom appeared. Likewise the Church waits, and has waited, for the announcement of Babylon’s doom (Rev 18:2). And what of the watchmen in the meantime? Will they have the same testimony as Isaiah, or will they be like the ten foolish virgins (Mt 25:1-13)?*” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

O my people, crushed on the threshing floor, I tell you what I have heard from the LORD Almighty, from the God of Israel. (NIV)

O my threshing, and the corn of my floor: that which I have heard of the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, have I declared unto you. (KJV)

O my threshing, and the son of my floor, That which I heard from Jehovah of Hosts, God of Israel, I have declared to you!’ (YLT)

“This verse can be taken in two ways, either as a word of encouragement or as a word of regret. Which way it is taken depends upon one’s conclusions concerning the date of the passage. *Those who take it to be from the sixth century see it as encouragement to the exiles: their oppressor is about to fall. Those who take the oracle as dating to the eighth century generally see in it the note of regret: although you hoped for relief from Assyria, Babylon will not be able to give any.*” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

BROKEN AND SEPARATED — The ancient method of separating grain from the husks was done by having animals drive over the cut grain, sometimes pulling a sled or heavy cart. The grain and chaff was then tossed into the air on a windy day. The wind would take the chaff away while the heavier grain would fall to the ground. *“It is not easy to maintain a position of faith, especially in times of stress and suffering, crushed on the threshing floor. It is so easy to opt for anything that offers promise of release. But faith sees differently. We are still my people; we are (literally) ‘my crushed one, son of my threshing floor’; the crushing pressures of life come from the Lord; the blows are his blows, purposely designed to bring the crop safely into the granary. The Almighty power that lies behind all history is that of the Lord, Yahweh, who is not only the Judge of those who disobey but the Redeemer, the God of Israel — not the God we chose but who chose us and who will never go back on His choice.”* [Motyer, *Isaiah*]

6. Edom (21:11,12)

<i>An oracle concerning Dumah: Someone calls to me from Seir, “Watchman, what is left of the night? Watchman, what is left of the night?” The watchman replies, “Morning is coming, but also the night. If you would ask, then ask; and come back yet again.”</i> (NIV)	<i>The burden of Dumah. He calleth to me out of Seir, Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night? The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come.</i> (KJV)	<i>The burden of Dumah. Unto me is [one] calling from Seir ‘Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?’ The watchman hath said, ‘Come hath morning, and also night, If ye inquire, inquire ye, turn back, come.’</i> (YLT)
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AN OBSCURE TWO VERSES — “This prophecy is very obscure. It comprises but two verses. When it was delivered, or on what occasion, or what was its design, it is not easy to determine. Its brevity has contributed much to its obscurity; nor, amidst the variety of interpretations which have been proposed, is it possible to ascertain with entire certainty the true explanation. Perhaps no portion of the Scriptures, of equal length, has been subjected to a greater variety of exposition.” [Barnes, *Notes on OT*] There are several possibilities for the identity of Dumah but the one most commonly accepted by commentators is Idumea or Edom since Seir (v11) was the principle mountain of Idumea. Dumah means *silence*, therefore the reference is a word-play on the word Edom and the Lord’s silence concerning their future. *“The Lord’s programm is carried forward not only in great, dramatic events (v9) but also in the regular forward moving of time (v12), in huge periods when nothing seems to be happening at all.”* [Motyer, *Isaiah*]

“A SURE HOPE (ALTHOUGH WE DON’T KNOW WHEN)” — Three possible interpretations are possible regarding the watchman’s reply, none of which may be ruled out due to grammar and each having its own advocates. One practical lesson which we might glean from this: *“Watchman, what of the night?”* And the watchman answers: *“I can tell you nothing. Will things change? No, they will not. Even if morning comes, night comes fast behind it.”* *“In response to the Edomite cry, Isaiah warns that the true dawn is in the undated future and in the meantime*

darkness predominates. The watchman of v6 is still watching; the crushing of v10 is still unhealed. Things go on as they have always done (2 Pet 3:4), yet it is always worthwhile to ask how much of the night is left, for darkness will not have the last word (Rom 13:11,12). Thus a solitary Gentile mirrors world history: the end will come; the end is not yet. Hope lies in the future (v12a) and though it is deferred it is sure (v12b)." [Motyer, *Isaiah*]

“ASK WITH A HUMBLE HEART” — Another possible interpretation is found in how the watchman answered, taken by some to have the sense of “I have no answer for you at this time; ask again when your heart is right.” “The design of this is, therefore: (1) to reprove them for the manner in which they had asked the question; (2) to assure them that God was willing to direct humble and serious inquirers; and (3) to show in what way a favorable answer could be obtained — to wit, by repentance. *And this is as true of sinners now as it was then. They often evince the reproachful and taunting spirit which the Idumeans did. They hear only a similar response — that prosperity and happiness await the Christian, though now in darkness and affliction; and that calamity and destruction are before the guilty. They might have the same answer — an answer that God would bless them and save them, if they would inquire in a humble, serious, and docile manner.*” [Barnes, *Notes on OT*]

7. The Arabians (21:13-17)

An oracle concerning Arabia: You caravans of Dedanites, who camp in the thickets of Arabia, bring water for the thirsty; you who live in Tema, bring food for the fugitives. They flee from the sword, from the drawn sword, from the bent bow and from the heat of battle. This is what the Lord says to me: “Within one year, as a servant bound by contract would count it, all the pomp of Kedar will come to an end. The survivors of the bowmen, the warriors of Kedar, will be few.” The LORD, the God of Israel, has spoken. (NIV)

The burden upon Arabia. In the forest in Arabia shall ye lodge, O ye travelling companies of Dedanim. The inhabitants of the land of Tema brought water to him that was thirsty, they prevented with their bread him that fled. For they fled from the swords, from the drawn sword, and from the bent bow, and from the grievousness of war. For thus hath the LORD said unto me, Within a year, according to the years of an hireling, and all the glory of Kedar shall fail: And the residue of the number of archers, the mighty men of the children of Kedar, shall be diminished: for the LORD God of Israel hath spoken it. (KJV)

The burden on Arabia. In a forest in Arabia ye lodge, O travellers of Dedanim. To meet the thirsty brought water have Inhabitants of the land of Tema, With his bread they came before a fugitive. For from the face of destructions they fled, From the face of a stretched-out sword, And from the face of a trodden bow, And from the face of the grievousness of battle. For thus said the Lord unto me: ‘Within a year, as years of a hireling, Consumed hath been all the honour of Kedar. And the remnant of the number of bow-men, The mighty of the sons of Kedar are few, For Jehovah, God of Israel, hath spoken!’ (YLT)

THE RECEPTION OF THE REFUGEES — Both Dedan (v13) and Tema (v14) are located in the northwestern part of the Arabian desert. Kedar (v16) is a general title for the Arabian area with its nomadic tribes. Again, dependent upon the time of which this is speaking, Isaiah may have been referring to an alliance which is doomed to failure. “Isaiah sees no success in an alliance with Babylon. All that Arabia will experience will be crowds of refugees fleeing from Babylon’s successive defeats and the destructive blast of war kindling her own possessions.” [Oswalt,

Isaiah] The sense seems to be that Tema is to aid those Dedanite caravans, southbound for home but still north of Tema which have had to flee and are off the beaten path, away from the oases and now exhausted and desperate. *Forests*: unless Isaiah is being sarcastic (of which we see no evidence), there are no forests in Arabia and therefore the sense is *in the wilderness, off the regular road*.

“BUT YOU ARE NOT TO ESCAPE AS WELL ...” — While at first the Temanites aid those fleeing the sword, within a year the confrontation would have advanced to their land as well. The land will be devastated and few will survive.

GUARANTEED BY THE GOD OF ISRAEL — *“But what is the guarantee of all this? For the Lord God of Israel has spoken. The audacity of such a statement is lost on us today. What does Israel’s God have to do with Babylon or Edom or Arabia? They have their own gods to whom their destiny is committed. Yet the Israelite prophet dares to say that it is his God alone who holds the nations in his hand. Dare we believe this today? Is it true that the word of Yahweh alone shapes the course of the nations? Or was that just nationalistic bombast which we, a more enlightened people, may dismiss? In fact, we may not dismiss it, for only in God’s sovereignty is there any hope for a race of human beings that seems determined to destroy itself.”* [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

“My heart falters, fear makes me
tremble; the twilight I longed for has
become a horror to me.”

— *Isaiah 21:4 NIV*